

new artist

the
paintings of

Lisa Yuskava

“What kind of thing am I looking at?”

I have to admit that the first time I encountered Lisa Yuskava's paintings I was taken aback. Some of her art bordered on shocking while the rest merely defied explanation. Her female nude with its soft pastel color backing left an uneasy feeling. What was she trying to say?

As I prepared for this interview, I thought I would be dealing with the stereotypical feminist—someone who viewed each painting as a miniature manifesto. But as I talked with her, she proved to be as difficult to categorize as one could imagine. In fact, she often offered baffling responses to my questions. Why did her painting *Blonde* (1995) have no nose? She explained that it was merely part of a triptych that was based on a palette of Laura Ashley colors. Well, why do some of her paintings have obscenity-laced titles? Besides expressing an interest in the vulgar, she just likes the way it sounds: “I really love the way if you're really good at cussing, it's kind of poetry.”

As the interview wore on, however, things began to make sense; she made a good case for

her art. By the time we finished, I understood not only her paintings, but her emergence as one of the more important artists of this decade. The following are selections from our conversation.

You've said in other interviews that you paint from the “male gaze,” “painting paintings that take the point of view of a man.” You stated: “I decided to make paintings that would be the dumbest, most far-out extension of what I was trying to say [about] male desire.” Is that still an accurate description of your work?

I said that about five years ago. I kind of regret it because I've changed what I believe. It became clear to me that my work's really not about the “male gaze” but about my own gaze. That comment has been stuck in my face a lot. People have made that concept very boring.

When I said it I was really struggling. I changed my paintings at that point. Women had always been the subject of my work, or in some instances it was me more but at the time it was hard to do what I needed to do from the point of view of just being Lisa. I was taking on another persona. I was young, starting out and very unsure if what I was doing was right. So I really needed to be more definite. If I could

rewrite it, because the “male gaze” has become a bullshit word, I would say that I was taking on the character of a very particular man, like Dennis Hopper in *Blue Velvet*. I was trying to torture the painting a little bit and it was actually kind of fun. It was more fun than being me because I'm much more timid and respectful. In a way, it was a little like a bedroom game. I found an incredible liberation in doing that, but I don't need to do that as strictly now. Today I free associate like the wind. I just bang around. As me, I'm much more confident doing various things.

But I'm not afraid of what the “male gaze” means. I've gotten a lot of shit for it. If people don't like what I'm doing nobody says will make it better. I don't understand why people can't just look at them as paintings. I always find it amazing that when as a young person I looked at paintings of Venus and Adonis, I never said as a young feminist, “Well, why doesn't she get clothed?” I just looked at the painting and was like, “F— me, this is amazing.”

In 1995, you painted one of your most arresting images, *Rorschach Blot*. It depicts a naked woman with no nose and her legs spread

Good Evening, Hamass, 1997

Oil on linen (two parts)



All photos courtesy of the Marianne Boesky Gallery, NY.

open. What were you trying to say with this painting? Was it that men objectify women?

I would have to say no.

I don't know what the message is

per se. When I

did that

painting, I

was trying to

finish a body

of work that

I was doing in

response to

earlier work. I

had painted these fe-

male backs that were very

demure and I realized I had made this

body of work that said, "Don't look at me."

I began to realize that I had manipulated my

audience. In a way, I was so insecure about

what I was doing. I was so unprepared. I was

quite young to be showing in 1990. I truly

had mixed feelings about having a show and,

as a result, I made a body of work that re-

sponded to that—one where I turned the fig-

ures away. I suppose I was protecting myself.

With the *Rorschach Blot* (1995) a few

years later I had continued to work through

the process trying to turn the figure around to

confront the viewer. It was the finale of the

back. The end of "Don't look at me." It was

I was trying to torture the painting a little bit and it was actually kind of fun.

the most far-out extension of what I would be afraid to show. And it's not just the subject of the painting. Lots of people have made paintings where a woman is standing with her legs spread. I think what's distinctive about this painting is that it's in such bad taste. It's the way it's painted. It's the kind of image it is. There are lots of messages in that painting that are about vulgarity. I was trying to put an end to something and move on to something else. It was actually my first turnover, and after that I made paintings like *Bad Habits* (1995) that are much more fluid.

I was very rigid up until the *Rorschach Blot*. I would tell my friends "I feel like I'm painting my last painting." "Why?" "Well, look at it. It's awful. It's obnoxious. It's a ridiculous painting. I'm not even sure I want to take ownership of this painting." Sometimes you have to make certain paintings as a way of honestly moving through your work. You have to make it to get to the next thing. I didn't really want to make that painting. It sounds goofy, but I really had to finish with as much clarity as possible. Clarity is what

ultimately saves a painter. Because we live in such a smoky world, you've got to make your thought processes as concrete as possible. So that's why I did that.

Much of your art—whether because of its style, subject matter or titles—demands a response from the viewer. What reaction are you looking for? Aren't you making some kind of moral statement in these paintings?

I love Greek myths, fables and fairy tales, and they always have a moral. I'm sure everything does have a moral. What's great is that sometimes the morals are really twisted. You can take a moral out of anything. The morals of my painting are whatever any particular viewer would see in it. I believe in the intelligence of my viewers. Whatever they think the painting is, that's what it is. Part of the reason I called that painting *Rorschach Blot* is because I fully believe that when you look at a painting, you see whatever you want to see. It's a passive object made active by the viewer. I leave lots of treats in my paintings that have gone undiscovered by myself and unexplained by myself for my viewers because that's the kind of painting that I most want to do. They have a sense of drama and humor, and they would never attempt to moralize. There's no finger wagging.

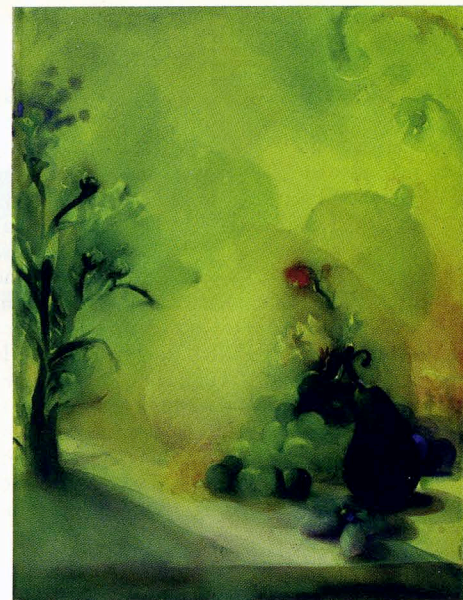
However, there may be the sense that this whole thing started by a failure of morals. I really hate art that's whatever you want it to be but, in a sense, I'm trying to say something without making it sound like that. A lot of people are afraid to relax with my paintings, have fun looking at them and think whatever they want to think. But I say, "Go ahead."

Now how the toothpick got in one of my paintings, *Blonde with Diapers and a Toothpick* (1994), I don't know. I thought it was kind of funny when I saw it. For some reason it struck me, and because it's a figurative painting, I had to decide what it was. So I said, "Is it a cigarette? No, to me it looks like a toothpick." What do diapers and toothpicks have to do with one another? I have no idea. People could come up with the dopest explanation for it or the richest explanation for it and they would probably both be right. I don't really know why I put it in there. It just seemed right.

How do you respond to viewers that read a feminist statement in your work?

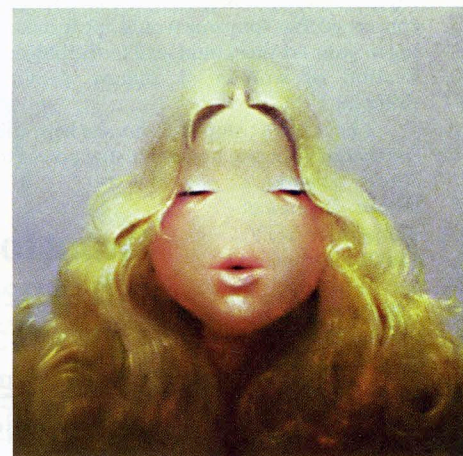
I think that there's a lot of insidious power and pride in these women. As to the whole feminist question: I certainly believe in it as far as I believe in any civil rights question. I want these things to seem powerful and women are really powerful. I want them to be powerful rather than victimized. Now somebody could throw a painting up to me and say, "What about this one that looks like a sad sack?" Well, when I was doing that I was trying to victimize her. I'm speaking now from the point of view of 1998. I've always worked from a really particular point of view at any given time. I'm speaking from the point of view of what I'm doing now.

My most recent painting is called *Good Evening, Hamass* (1997). That's a freaky



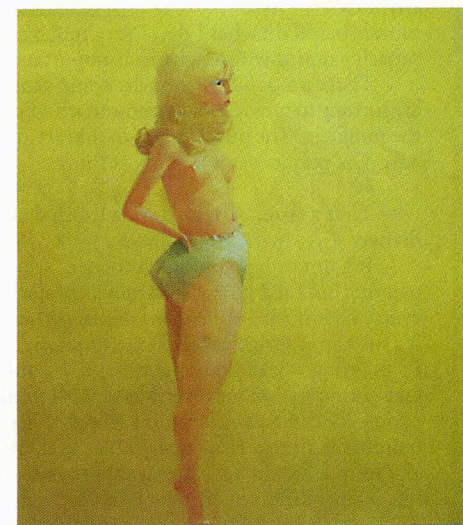
Tit Heaven #23, 1992

Watercolor on paper



Blonde, 1995

Oil on linen; Triptych



Blonde with Diaper and Toothpick, 1994

Oil on linen

by Jayson Whitehead

painting. You tell me what it means. I moved my studio and it looks out over the Hudson River. I see the sunset every single day and that's as much as I know about it. The sunsets over New Jersey with all the pollution are just magnificent and I wanted to paint a painting with a sunset. So that's where the painting came from; the desire to paint a sunset. Everything else came out of those sort of associations. I don't know where her big ham ass came from per se. It was just a vehicle for the sunset to reflect on. That's how she got a ham ass. Because it looked like a ham ass. It's like a psychology test. What does it look like? It looks like a ham ass. I thought it was funny because there are people who have ham asses. I'm probably one of them. Someone said these just seem to be visual spectacles, and I think in some way it's true. Especially with that one. You just look at it going, "What kind of thing am I looking at?"

In recent years, people have tried to hold art accountable for particular crimes. For instance, John Grisham sued Oliver Stone over a friend's death supposedly caused by Stone's *Natural Born Killers*. Even though you deny a specific moral message in your work, are you concerned that someone would apply meaning to your art that could lead to the objectification of women or merely provide titillation?

I have to be completely honest here and say that painting no longer has the power to affect anybody's morals. Because of things like MTV, painting is so colorless in our society right now. Besides, the number of people that are actually going to see my paintings is low. So on one level, I dismiss the question of whether or not I'm going to turn anybody around or give anybody bad morals based on what I do. I very much approach painting with a lack of self-importance.

There's a good reason why some artists are turning to movies. They know that's where the public is. The public is not in fine art arenas. The public is not looking at things.

That's true. Artists have a limited audience.

It's not only a limited audience. I love painting but I also go gaga in a movie theater—even a bad movie. When you're sitting there, it's such an amazing experience. It's power. If I was doing what I do in the movies, I would take your question more seriously. But I think people look at a painting and know that it's a handmade thing. How many kids would really want a handmade Christmas present? It has a very different presence in the world. There was a time when painting could make

people believe there was a God. That really doesn't exist any longer. The hoopla caused by what I do always surprises me because painting seems so ineffectual. The reason I do my work is that I always expect it to be private. Some people say, "Why do you show it?" Well, because there's a sharing involved in making work. You do want people to look at it.

I'm not Andres Serrano. The difference between a photographer and a painter is that a photographer actually put that crucifix in the pee-pee in order to take a picture of it. A photographer has to ask a woman to spread her legs and then take a picture. That person was there. Painting, on the other hand, is fiction. It must be understood like that. I know, of course, that there are people who don't. The kind of fiction that has rock music attached to it is much more powerful than anything I could ever do. When somebody looks at a video on MTV or a movie, it's pretty clear what's hitting them. With my stuff it seems so mixed up. It's intended to be. It might sound like I'm a little bummed out about the lack of power in painting, but I'm not. I've always known you don't change the world through painting. I think that's part of the reason why I allow myself to take such liberties.

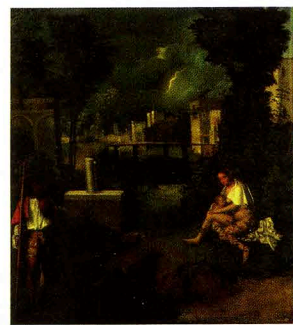
Every artist is influenced by the painters that have come before them. What painters have influenced you?

Degas and Manet: the two Impressionists/Realists. They were the most intellectual painters of their time. And I always liked the bad boy aspect of both of them. You could always sense their rebellion. I always liked how Degas seemed conservative and yet was really twisted; I was also very affected by his misogyny. I never really thought of them as misogynistic until I was told they were misogynistic. And I'm not a hundred percent sure they are. You don't paint something for years that you hate. The monoprints that Degas did of prostitutes are so weird, wild and gross. There were girls douching and men watching them—all this kind of deviant behavior.

I loved these things and I wonder what they say about me. It pretty much affected how I became interested in what I was doing. It told me that it was okay. I question what I do all the time. I used to ask friends of mine that were professional feminists, "Is there such a thing as misogyny?" Misogyny means woman hating. I'm not a woman hater. There are certain women I hate and certain men I hate and certain children I hate. I guess that sounds like

a misanthrope, not a misogynist. What does it mean if a woman wants to paint through that same lens, to do a form of female misogyny? This woman I knew once said, "Well, so many women hate their bodies and hate themselves. They walk around saying 'Oh my God, I need a facelift. I need this. I need that. I'm not beautiful. I weigh too much. I weigh too little.'" We talked about how that kind of self-deprecation is so common with women. A lot of women are just too involved to admit it. How many women do you know that love their bodies openly? They don't. Men don't think about it as much. When they get a tire they just go to a gym. There's no self-flagellation. Women flagellate themselves something fierce. I think that's internalized misogyny, a self-hatred. I was very interested in that at one time.

The painters that influenced me the most were Giovanni Bellini, Giorgione and the Venice School. They were magnificent with their use of light, color and atmosphere. I love Italian Renaissance painting and Northern Renaissance painting. I have such impeccable bad taste. I grew up in a blue collar neighborhood. I know all the trash. That's why I included some of the bad language in my work. I want to marry both aspects of myself: poor white trash girl loves Italian Renaissance—something as stupid as that.



La Tempesta

Giorgione

tell: Christ was crucified. Christ rose from the dead. Or a very particular allegory. This painting had none of that which was very interesting and important to me. It's like a dream—you don't know why but it's compelling. That's really where I get my permission from. ■

Lisa Yuskavage's paintings will be shown at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati [Apr. 5-June 8, 1998] and in "Young Americans 2" at the Saatchi Gallery, London [opening spring 1998].

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